

System Configuration Team Meeting Notes

October 20, 2005

1. Greetings and Introductions.

The October 20, 2005 meeting of the System Configuration Team was chaired by Bill Hevlin. the following is a summary (not a verbatim transcript) of the topics discussed and decisions made at this meeting. Anyone with questions or comments about these notes should contact Kathy Ceballos at 503/230-5420.

2. FFDRWG and SRWG Updates.

Marvin Shuttters said the Walla Walla District FFDRWG group will meet on November 3-4. Kim Fodrea said there was a Portland District FFDRWG meeting on October 5; the group's next meeting will be December 1. Topics discussed t the October 5 meeting included TSP progress, and pressure testing of tagged and untagged fish. There was another meeting on October 6 to discuss The Dalles configuration and operations evaluation; at that meeting, there was a lot of discussion of the BGS. There wasn't much support expressed at the meeting for continuing with plans and specs, she said, but there was agreement that, before tabling the concept, there would be another trip to Vicksburg to look at the model, and to see whether the Corps still feels strongly that there is a survival benefit associated with the decreased spill idea. The Corps will need to convince NMFS and others that potential survival benefits are realistic, Fodrea said.

With respect to recent SRWG activities, Shuttters said there is a special conference call scheduled to discuss Little Goose 2006 research objectives and methodologies for Tuesday, October 25. Russ Kiefer noted for the record that, unless 2006 turns out to be an abysmal flow year, there will be some real desire to get a study done at Little Goose in 2006, even if flows are below the spill criteria threshold – we need that information, he said.

There is an SRWG meeting scheduled at NMFS' Portland office for next Thursday, October 27, for agency reps and lead biologists, Shuttters said. The intent is to get the reps' feedbacks on things they feel are important to go forward with, as well as the items the Corps plans to go forward with in 2006. Basically, it's an interim meeting, prior to the meeting at which we discuss the final proposals, said Hevlin. Final proposals are scheduled to be received by November 1, added Shuttters; at that point,

you'll see the proposals we've asked for, and you'll have an opportunity to tell us what else you think is needed. Researchers have not been invited to the October 27 meeting, he added.

In response to a question from Ron Boyce, Shuttles said the Corps has already made the decision to move out on some projects – those with a long lead time for ordering equipment, and which have a high likelihood of being approved for funding. At the last SCT meeting, we identified a cut-off line for FY'06 funding, and are moving out on the items above that line under the assumption that funding for these high-priority items will be available, Shuttles said.

3. Lower Monumental RSW.

Hevlin distributed a series of handouts on this topic – a one-pager, a decision framework with the questions addressed in it, and a summary of the available biological information. Basically, this discussion is picking up where it left off, with the study data we have from 2005 and how it addresses the questions in the decision framework, he said.

Ann Setter said the single page is intended as a brief description and overview; she noted that one question that could not be addressed was how much additional spill would need to be added to the RSW operation to make it similar to gas cap spill. We don't have any of the preliminary hydroacoustic data from either Lower Granite or Ice Harbor at this time, she explained; there is nothing comparable we could use as a guideline, so that question is not addressed in this packet.

The second document we've handed out recaps the available biological information, Setter continued; this is the relevant background information we have, and hopefully it will be useful. Finally, we've handed out a decision framework – the Corps' take on what the answers might be based on the data. We were thinking, as a starting-point for this discussion, that we might go back to the questions and the decision framework, and talk about whether or not people agree with the answers we have proposed, she said. One caveat that has been mentioned by several people is the difference in discharge between Ice Harbor and Lower Granite, and how that might be affecting RSW effectiveness.

How would the Corps propose answering the training spill question? Ron Boyce asked. The thought was that, through hydroacoustic data, we could come up with a spill efficiency curve at given discharges, then try to look at that in the context of passage data at those discharges, Setter replied. Do we have enough data to construct such a curve? Boyce asked. I think we'll need to wait to see what hydroacoustics gives us, Fedders replied. I think that for both Lower Granite and Ice Harbor, we should have some idea of the efficiency curves with the RSW vs. spill without the RSW, said Shuttles – we have some data points from earlier radio tag studies that should give us an idea of the efficiency curve without the RSW at Lower Monumental. We should then

be able to look at the difference in the shapes of those curves for Ice Harbor and Lower Granite, and arrive at some informed speculations as to whether Lower Monumental would give us some sort of intermediate response between the two RSWs we already have, Shuttles said. And how would that fit into the decision tree? Boyce asked. It doesn't currently exist on the decision tree, but it could potentially be added, Setter replied.

There is also a decision document on RSWs that is being worked through Division, which compares the RSW with other alternatives, said Shuttles. I haven't seen it, but it should contain some information that could be useful here. If economic benefit is one of the RSW drivers, in addition to the biological benefits, that exercise could produce some useful information, he said.

Hevlin noted that, at Lower Monumental, the most recent data he has seen, including the 2005 subyearling data and the 2004 radio tag data, showed that Lower Monumental has very high efficiency for the amount of spill – on the order of 85%+ for 35% spill in the spring. Are you asking how many more fish we would get through the RSW? I didn't pose that question, but I think it's a good one, Boyce replied. I think what we're trying to get at is how much training spill would be needed to provide similar spillway passage to gas cap spill, Boyce said.

I'm the guilty party there, said Russ Kiefer; I remember some discussions about what we were going to test with the RSW in 2005, and my point was that we wanted to test what the action agencies thought would get us to an equivalent value to the excellent spillway passage we were getting through gas cap spill at Ice Harbor. We missed that by a little bit, he added. There is nothing wrong with doing it in the most cost-effective manner possible, Kiefer said, but I don't want to see the excellent spillway passage reduced at Ice Harbor through the use of the RSW. I want to be sure that, next year at Ice Harbor, whatever the action agencies set up errs on the side of the fish, because in 2005, we missed that target. I would only observe that Lower Monumental is a real different creature, in terms of how much you can spill and stay under the gas cap, said Hevlin – at Ice Harbor, it's about 85% of the river during the spring, but at Lower Monumental, it's only about 35%. Even at 35%, however, it seems to me that the Lower Monumental spillway is very efficient, Hevlin added.

The SCT then devoted a lengthy discussion to the Corps' decision document, offering a variety of clarifying questions and comments. Kiefer noted that the State of Idaho's position is that RSWs promise both significant biological and economic benefits; for more than a year, Idaho has made it very clear that they want to see RSWs installed at all four Lower Snake dams. More than a year ago, he said, the agencies and tribes sent a joint letter to the Corps explaining that recommendation; I am concerned that, with respect to Lower Monumental, the first question is now, should we install an RSW at that project? I thought that, under the 2004 BiOp, and based on commitments I thought I had heard from the responsible regional entities, we had a commitment to have RSWs installed at all four Lower Snake projects as soon as possible, Kiefer said.

Now we're debating criteria as to whether we're going to build them or not. My perspective is that the only reason we would back off from that commitment is if we saw biological information that gave us cause for concern, Kiefer said. Do we really need to prove the biological benefits of RSWs for each project? I thought we had already made the decision to build an RSW at Lower Monumental, he said – in fact, I thought, at one time, that we had a commitment from the Corps that we would have a Lower Monumental RSW up and running by 2006.

Our primary question was whether the biological studies uncovered some fatal flaw in the design, Hevlin replied. The other question is, should the RSW go into bay 7 or bay 8? But in the process of trying to get the criteria, that took on a bit more of a life of its own – the IT, in our discussions with them earlier this year, wanted some answers, and the SCT tried to follow up. This is the best we have now, but it doesn't have to control our decision – it is a work in progress.

The discussion continued in this vein for some minutes. Kiefer reiterated his understanding that, in the absence of fatal flaws illuminated by the biological data, RSW construction would proceed at Lower Monumental. Boyce said that, in his opinion, in the context of the August 2004 IT recommendation, all of the information currently available from Ice Harbor, Lower Granite and Lower Monumental only confirms the decision to proceed with RSW installation at all four Lower Snake projects. Hevlin noted that, until last summer, one data gap was how well the RSWs did in terms of subyearling passage; the 2005 data indicates that they pass subyearlings as well as they do yearlings.

With respect to question 1 in the decision document, is anyone at SCT opposed to proceeding with RSW installation at Lower Monumental? asked one participant. No SCT objections were raised on this point.

Moving on to the second question in the decision document, the decision as to which spill bay in which to install the Lower Monumental RSW, is survival through spill bay 8 equal or greater than survival through spill bay 7? said Setter. You will recall the lengthy discussion of NMFS' radio tag pipe release study for this year; the results of that study showed that survival was roughly equal through both bays, although the point estimate of survival was slightly higher through bay 8. Statistically, however, the two estimates were roughly the same.

The SCT devoted a lengthy discussion to these results; in particular, the power and validity of the data on which to base a conclusion that survival is slightly higher through bay 8. Dave Wills expressed some uncertainty about the data underlying this conclusion, and said that, from a Fish and Wildlife Service perspective, he would prefer to take a little time to review that data before rendering an opinion as to the relative merits of bay 7 vs. bay 8. I'm not ready to make a definitive recommendation today, he said.

Ultimately, Boyce said FPAC would like an opportunity to discuss this decision further at its meeting next Tuesday, and to put its recommendation in the form of a letter. Hopefully, that will reflect a consensus recommendation from all of the salmon managers, Kiefer added, in the form of a letter to the SCT chair.

4. Continued Discussion of FY'06 CRFM Program Elements and Funding Cap.

John Kranda distributed the most recent version of the FY'06 CRFM spreadsheet, and reiterated that, in all likelihood, there will be about \$79 million in available '06 funding.

The group devoted the remainder of today's meeting to a discussion of this document, offering a series of clarifying questions, comments and suggestions. Ultimately, Kranda said he will produce a revised version of the FY'06 CRFM spreadsheet, reflecting today's discussion, prior to the November SCT meeting.

5. Next SCT Meeting Date.

The next meeting of the System Configuration Team was set for Thursday, November 10. Meeting summary prepared by Jeff Kuechle.